*Charles B. Seib*

# The CIA and Press 'Pollution' Abroad

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News about the transition now going on in Washington centers, naturally, on the new team. The selection of a Vance is more interesting than the waning days of a Kissinger.

But the transition can also be a time for dealing with those troublesome odds and ends that kept working their way to the bottom of the pile—the kind of unfinished business one discovers while cleaning out one's desk.

There is one piece of unfinished business facing George Bush, whose resignation as director of the CIA will take effect on Inauguration Day. It is the CIA's involvement with the press.

After much backing and filling, the agency appears to have severed, or almost severed, its connections with American journalists and those who regularly write for the American press from abroad. There may still be a few strands, but a CIA spokesman says they should all be cut by the first of the year.

The agency steadfastly continues to refuse to name the American journalists who have been on its payroll or the news organizations it used. Nevertheless, the renunciation of future involvement with the American press is to be applauded.

The CIA has not, however, renounced involvement with the foreign press in three general categories: the use of foreign journalists for intelligence purposes, the planting of false or misleading news in the foreign press, and the planting of news that is not false but placed for the CIA's own purposes.

American journalists have been particularly concerned about the second activity—the planting of false information in the foreign press. It is argued that there can be a fallout in this country from such press pollution abroad. A false story planted in a foreign publication or news service may find its way over here and be printed in the U.S. press.

Secretary Kissinger gave opponents of this sort of thing some encouragement a few months ago. He was asked to comment on a Senate report indicating that the CIA has foreign journalists on its payroll and plants false stories in the foreign press.

He replied that he didn't believe that putting misleading information out as news was ever justifiable, and added: "I would think that any information that is placed through any American governmental organization should be such that it could be published here without misleading the American public."

Whether that statement will influence the CIA in this administration or the next remains to be seen. So far, the agency refuses to give up the option of corrupting the foreign press if that is necessary to carry out an intelligence objective.

Just how much of it is going on now, no one outside the intelligence establishment can say. A CIA spokesman hints that it is not a common practice and points out that covert activities must be cleared with authorities outside the agency before they can be embarked upon. Nevertheless, the option is retained.

As I have indicated, American journalists who oppose CIA pollution of the foreign press usually do so on selfish grounds. They fear the planted stories will find their way in the American press and they will be unknowingly peddling false news.

But I see another, equally persuasive reason for urging that the President—this one or the next one—get the CIA out of the news business all around the world: It is hypocritical and damaging to our national integrity to insist that our press be kept pure but to concede the CIA's right to corrupt the press in the rest of the world.

## The News Business

Presumably we stand for freedom not just in this country but for all people. Presumably we believe that true freedom can exist only in informed societies, and that an informed society cannot exist without a free press.

It follows then that to countenance corruption of the foreign press by an agency of the U.S. government, whatever the purpose, is to betray the concept of freedom we profess to hold so dear.

This fall U.S. officials and representatives of the American press fought side by side against a Third World effort to sanction governmental control of the news. A Russian-sponsored resolution to that end was defeated at the recent UNESCO conference in Nairobi, at least for the time being.

We can blame ourselves in part for the Third World proposal. The press of the Western nations has been almost criminally neglectful in its coverage of the undeveloped nations. It usually takes a natural disaster or a bloody revolution or other catastrophe in a Third World country to get our attention. This should not be.

Nevertheless, the proposal for governmental press domination on the Soviet pattern is the antithesis of our concept of the role of the press in free societies.

Unfortunately, the American position is diminished in this global contest by the refusal of the CIA to give up its embarrassing option to meddle with the press of other countries. As the American Society of Newspapers Editors noted in a resolution approved last month, our pleas to other nations to observe everyone's right to news that is uncontrolled by governments lack force under present conditions.

The issue is bound to come up again. When it does, we will be more persuasive if this country has formally and unequivocally renounced interference with the press of the rest of the world.